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### 11/22/2016 Current Gen Ed Thinking

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The following is the history and rationale concerning the emergence of working groups to envision the relationship between the General Education program and the Integrated Cluster Initiative. Please read this document in preparation for the November 30 meeting.

This summer, Mark Fischler, the Dean of the First Year Experience, asked a group of cluster guides to begin thinking about potential changes to the First Year Seminar (FYS) in relation to the cluster initiative. The cluster guides suggested that because the FYS is part of the Gen Ed program, the Gen Ed committee should be involved in any such conversations. Those Gen Ed committee members and cluster guides who were interested in working on the FYS met once in the summer and Dean Fischler appointed that group, plus a Library faculty member, to be the First Year Seminar Coordinating Council (FYSCC) (as specified in the Faculty Bylaws). The group met a few times to plan its work but it quickly became clear that we needed to meet with President Birx so that we could understand his vision for the FYS and the Gen Ed program. He wrote a [blog post](#) on this topic early in the Fall semester.

Members of the FYSCC who are also on the Gen Ed Committee reported the content of the conversation with the president back to the full Gen Ed Committee. The Gen Ed Committee then decided to create a subcommittee called the Gen Ed Working Group (GEWG) to focus on the president's suggestions concerning changes to the Gen Ed Program. The GEWG is comprised of members of the Gen Ed Committee, including Dean Gail Mears. The 4 cluster guides who are part of the FYSCC are also working with the GEWG and help to provide consistency and communication between the two groups. The GEWG also had a conversation with the president regarding his vision for the relationship between Gen Ed and the cluster initiative.

From the several conversations with the president, we have realized that the only thing we need to work on for Fall 2017 is changes to the FYS to begin to move in the direction of a cluster-focused Gen Ed program. And because we are looking at a phased approach to the implementation of changes, we don't have to do everything we think should be done in FYS for Fall 2017. Instead, we are trying to develop a plan for the changes for Fall 2017 that will allow us to do what we really want to do with FYS and Gen Ed by Fall 2019. With that in mind, here is what we're thinking so far.

We are currently working on a set of goals for the new FYS. Although we haven't quite completed that work yet, the FYSCC conversations have focused on two main areas of change regarding the FYS:

1. **The FYS should introduce students to the idea of working in a cluster.** This meant that we had to first define for ourselves what "working in a cluster" means. We are still in the process of doing this but here's what we have determined so far. Note that at the moment, we don't think every FYS needs to do every one of the following.
  - **Working in a cluster means working across disciplines.** In order to be able to do that, students need to understand what a discipline is as well as what interdisciplinarity is. They need to be able to communicate and collaborate with others outside of their own discipline.
  - **Working in a cluster means engaging with the outside world.** The students might work on a project related to a societal issue, trying to understand and address one small piece of that issue, and ultimately sharing their work with an audience larger than the instructor of the class. We have begun to talk about these societal issues as challenges related to "[wicked problems](#)." Wicked problems are resistant to resolution and have no

"right" or "wrong" answer. They are complex and difficult to understand. Working on one aspect of the problem often raises new issues. Some students might work on these problems with an external partner. The goal is to allow the students to do meaningful work that has the potential to endure beyond the end of the course. This is related to getting students to "own" their educational experience, to find meaning in it by doing meaningful work (see below).

- **Working in a cluster means focusing on project based learning.** The open labs are a resource for project based learning. So a FYS instructor can bring students to the open labs to take advantage of that resource while students are working on projects.
  - **Working in a cluster means collaborating with others.** The collaboration might occur just within the FYS itself among students from different disciplines. Or the collaboration might occur between students in a particular FYS and students in other courses, including other FYS sections, Directions courses, Connections courses, and/or discipline-based courses. Or the collaboration might occur between the students in a particular FYS and some sort of external partner or audience.
2. **The FYS should be the place where students begin to "own" their educational experience.** In other words, the FYS should **jump start student engagement in their own learning experiences.** We discussed many ways to get students to begin to understand why they are taking the courses that they are taking and to articulate the connections between those courses. Some of what we have to say about this spills over into the GEWG's current thinking about the Gen Ed program. But here's what we think so far about the role that FYS can play in fostering this kind of engagement.
- **Students should be able to choose a FYS based on their interests rather than based on the time that a particular section is offered.** Often, students choose a particular FYS because it fits into their schedule, not because they are particularly interested in the topic of the FYS. We talked a lot about student choice in developing their class schedule, especially in their first year at PSU. More about that later in the section on the Gen Ed program.
  - Related to the discussion about **choice of FYS section**, we talked about the development of the question or challenge to be addressed by the FYS. **We talked about ways that we might get more student involvement in the development of those questions or challenges.** We don't have any answers for how we might do that but it's an idea we have discussed.
  - **Within the FYS, students will need to think about and plan the courses that they might take over their 4 years at PSU and how those courses relate to their interests and goals.** To do this, students (and instructors) will need to understand the content of courses outside of their current discipline, especially the Gen Ed Directions courses.
  - **Students should work on projects and other activities that are meaningful, both to them and to the outside world.** The results of the projects and other course activities should have the potential to live beyond the duration of the course and be seen by others besides the instructor of the course.

The GEWG has been discussing short term changes to the Gen Ed program that will support the president's vision that students understand the value of the Gen Ed program as well as the connection

between what they learn in their Gen Ed courses and their major discipline. There are other larger philosophical discussions concerning the structure of Gen Ed that were raised by the Gen Ed Task Force in their report last year. The GEWG has chosen to try to make some small progress by just focusing on the president's ideas for now.

In particular, the president discusses **4 tools** that we can leverage in the short term to begin to help students make the kind of connection he envisions. **The first of those 4 tools is the FYS.** With a few, relatively small changes to the course, he believes (and the GEWG agrees) that we can help students to begin to make the connection. The other 3 tools are:

1. **Open labs will support project based learning.** We already discussed the role of projects in the FYS. The GEWG believes that focusing more of our curriculum on projects will allow students to understand how the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they are learning in their various courses are connected to each other. Open labs are the places where students, staff, faculty, and external partners from various disciplines come together to work on these projects and represent an important resource to the success of the cluster initiative.
2. **Theming Gen Ed Directions courses will create a framework which connects sets of directions courses into some sort of credential (a certificate, a badge, a notation on a transcript--we haven't decided yet).** Through this framework, we can demonstrate to students that there is a connection among these courses. With the incentive, but no requirement, to achieve the credential, students are encouraged to start thinking about and planning their curriculum as set of classes that are connected to each other. The short term goal is to just create these credentials. As faculty teaching the courses begin to think about the relationship of their course to other within a particular credential, we hope that the content of the course itself will change in a way that explicitly articulates and emphasizes the connections. We currently think that there is no requirement for any student to complete a credential of this sort. We also think that some students may choose to complete multiple credentials. Finally, we are not thinking that every directions course will need to be part of a credential. We have spent a little bit of time thinking about possibilities for these credentials and were able to come up with many. But we think it is the purview of the faculty teaching these courses to propose the credentials.
3. **A Gen Ed capstone** course will allow students to work on a project that ties together the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that they have learned in their Gen Ed courses and their major discipline. We currently require an Integration Connection (INCO) course that is described as a capstone even though we generally have not been using it in that manner so the GEWG is thinking that the INCO course can serve as the kind of capstone that we envision. This will require some changes in some of the INCO courses that we currently offer but we see this as work to be done in a later phase of the changes. Having some sort of capstone is absolutely critical if we are going to assess whether students understand and can articulate why they took the courses that they did.

The GEWG has discussed other issues related to getting students to make the kind of connections that the president envisions. A significant immediate concern is the lack of choice for students in beginning their educational journey. In particular, our first year students get very little choice in their first year courses. We hard schedule them into 4 of their 5 first semester courses, letting them pick only their FYS. Of course, they can change their schedule if they insist but we strongly discourage it because there are so few seats available when they come to orientation. Even their choice of FYS is limited. Often a

student's first choice for FYS is already full or it conflicts with another course currently on their schedule. And so many students choose a FYS based on when it is offered rather than on the content. To compound matters, many students have little choice in their classes for their second semester because, by the time they get to register, many of the courses they'd like to take are already full. If we want students to engage fully in their education, particular their general education, we have to do better than this. We have to examine our processes to figure out how to give students real choice in their courses. The GEWG has not figured out how to do this yet but we recognize that, as a campus, we need to change our operation so that we really are student-centered, putting the needs of the students first in as many of our policies and procedures as possible.

There are many other issues related to Gen Ed that will need to be considered as we move forward with the cluster initiative. But this narrative is a summary of our thinking about Gen Ed so far.